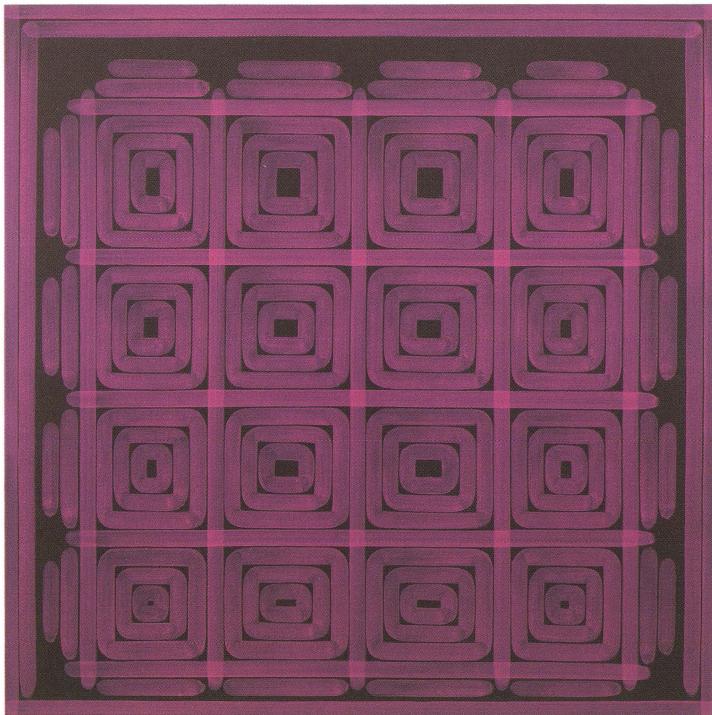


DAN WALSH UNCOMMON GROUND

JUNE 8 – OCTOBER 21, 2012 MUSEUM OF ART, RHODE ISLAND SCHOOL OF DESIGN EXHIBITION NOTES 40 SUMMER 2012



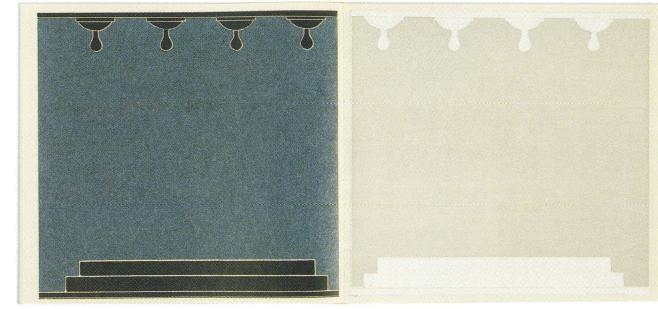
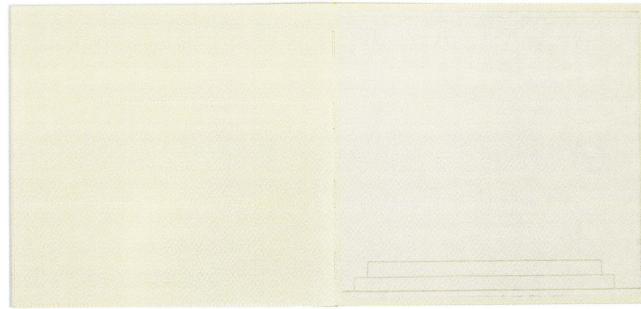
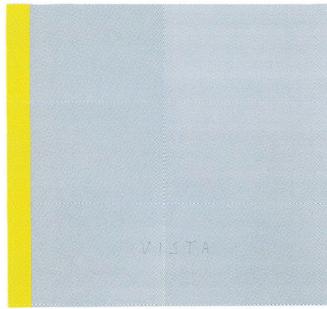
Visitor 2009

< Signal 2012

A Conversation with Dan Walsh

Dan Walsh has been devoted to abstract painting since he arrived in New York in the early 1980s. Naturally his work has evolved over the past three decades, but he has remained consistently attached to Minimalism's basic language of geometry and grids. I have followed Walsh's work since the late 1990s, when I saw an exhibition of large canvases at the Paula Cooper Gallery in New York. I was struck by their directness and quirky sense of play, achieved with a simple vocabulary of line, shape, and color. The paintings of the past decade retain these characteristics but add to them increasingly lush color and more complex pattern. Rather than creating hard-edge forms, Walsh draws lines by hand and applies paint with soft brushes, eliciting luminous inflections of light and tonality. Repeated simple strokes form layered configurations of punctuated lines,

Vista 2009 (complete)



cross-hatched grids, concentric squares, and collapsed diamonds. While patterns repeat, unanticipated irregularities, such as forms hovering at the bottom of the field, convey a personal dimension. The balance shifts back and forth between intuition and control.

On occasion, Walsh has used tape to define the gallery space in which his own work and sometimes that of other artists is shown, thus serving as installation designer and curator as well as artist. In our Lower Farago Gallery, Walsh has applied thin black tape to the wall and installed his earliest painting in the show above it. According to the artist, "This architectural notation defines the space, but also proposes a model or fiction." In addition to paintings, the show features several limited edition books, designed by the artist, where he experiments with sequential shifts in color, shape, and form and a variety of print techniques. The overall effect is always logical but never too logical.

—Judith Tannenbaum, Richard Brown Baker Curator of Contemporary Art

JT: While you've been working on paintings for this exhibition at the RISD Museum, you've just opened a show of new paintings at Paula Cooper Gallery. How has your work changed over the past two years, since your last New York solo show? How has it changed over the past ten or twenty years?

DW: There are cycles in everyone's studio practice: some years you try to find a new form or format and some years you are researching ways to use that newfound form. The work in the current New York show is developing what I laid out in my last New York show—a more process-oriented painting. Ten years ago I was embracing color again after a long break from it. Twenty years ago I was committed to a model of painting informed by the late-'80s context of artists like Peter Halley, who used abstract painting as a model toward a more social agenda.

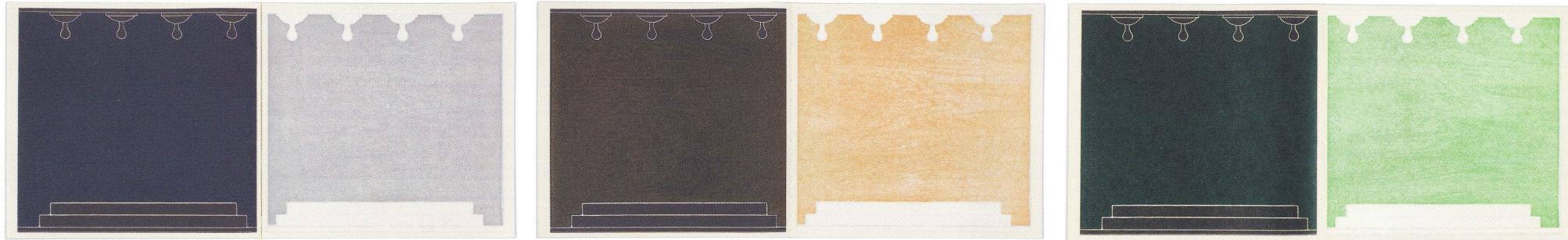
I suppose I am like most artists—after fleshing out the interesting variations, you move on. I just seem to go through these cycles more quickly than most abstract

painters. I always seem to be changing—maybe it's a way of feeling alive.

JT: How has your work stayed the same?

DW: Twenty years ago I would have drawn a basic rectangle on a white field hanging from a line or on a plinth—waiting to be seen. Ten years ago I might have had a display of squares of color in a simple grid or shelving structure—asking to be interacted with. Today, I am more likely to speak about mandalas—an interactive experience that is optical and psychological. In other words, my work has always been dependent on the viewer. My investment in Minimalism, basic geometries, the grid, and the allover is also consistent. But I don't see these forms in the typical canonical way. I propose that when looking at such neutral, elemental, specific forms, we bring our own psychology to bear on the experience.

JT: Can you talk about your painting process? I was somewhat surprised to discover that your work is



not as systematic as one might initially think.

DW: Where in the 1990s I was concerned with a historical problem in abstraction, now it seems my paintings are generating their own problems. Each painting starts from the last one. I change my mind about what to paint and the colors to use from the beginning to the end of the painting. But overall, in the past five years I have been “marking time” with elemental building blocks, laying down brushstrokes and dots that occupy the field, the plane. The weight of the brushstrokes in the overall space of the painting is a concern of mine, and this sort of thing is inherently intuitive. But what is not intuitive is that I paint in passes—much like a printer—not in a call and response like an Abstract Expressionist.

JT: What are your thoughts about the current state of painting—abstract or otherwise? Is it a good time to be a painter?

DW: In a sense it's a great time to be a painter—

everything is possible; nothing is irrelevant. But that is also the problem with painting: there is no common context. Art needs a context, a prevailing movement or belief to reject or react to in order to make a dense experience. Recently I walked out of an exhibition by a young, talented, and popular artist and said, “Relates to everything, commits to nothing.” This new generation has no need intellectually to develop or define themselves, and therefore are more likely to reflect culture than critique it. In this regard, I am glad to be fifty-one years old—my own history can be my context. I feel like a fool hanging on to the end of a generation's belief structure, but I have to!

JT: Is it different being an abstract painter now versus when you came to New York in the early 1980s?

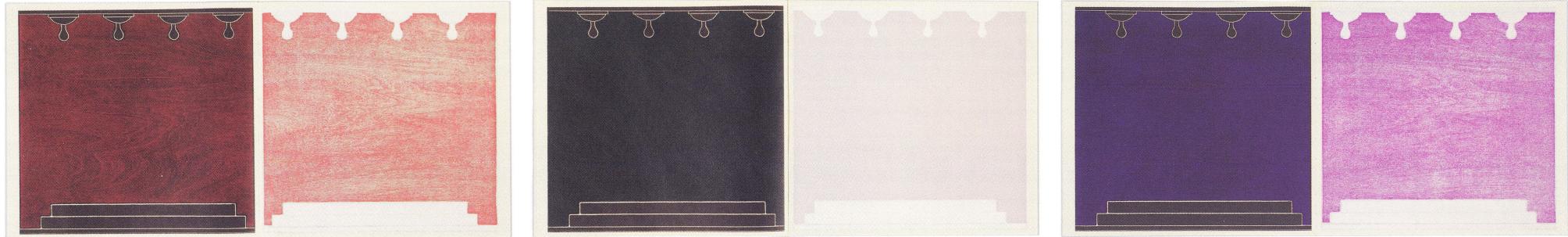
DW: Definitely. Again it's the context. Think of all the theory that was being written and read then. Everyone was talking about postmodernism. You could be for or against that, but it gave a certain structure to the

dialogue. More importantly, whatever anyone critiqued or misread, the subject had to be developed before it was dismantled or deconstructed. That's what is so different today—talk about free-floating signifiers!

JT: How do you deal with all the weight or baggage of art history? Is it possible to create work that seems new and distinctive today?

DW: Help! Yes, that's exactly what I am so conflicted about. Although determining, I always saw art history as a friend, a helpful backdrop on which to articulate one's ideas. I like being a historian, and I believe that coming to terms with one's own history is a necessary step in the journey to being a good artist.

As for new and distinctive work, I don't feel this is an issue for me, and I assume it isn't for many abstract painters. I would rather be in the middle of history than try to find the new zeitgeist. It seems like the present context is always swallowing you up. A new form developed one year is in a TV commercial the next. What's



meaningful to me is what is new for me—for my story. I'm trying to make a painting that can only be seen in the present tense but that is still historically determined. I know this sounds absurd, but it has gotten me into some interesting places.

JT: You have referred to your work as “perceptual.” What do you mean by that?

DW: When I think of perceptual, I think of Robert Irwin, phenomenology, simply the act of experiencing. Should I say “retinal”? I am trying to isolate and cultivate active looking. My one-line statement about my work is: “Where the retinal meets the symbolic.”

JT: You've also alluded to the issue of “responsibility” in your work. Were you referring to your responsibility as an artist or as a human being?

DW: Many years ago, I believed that abstract painting was so inherently idealistic that being responsible just

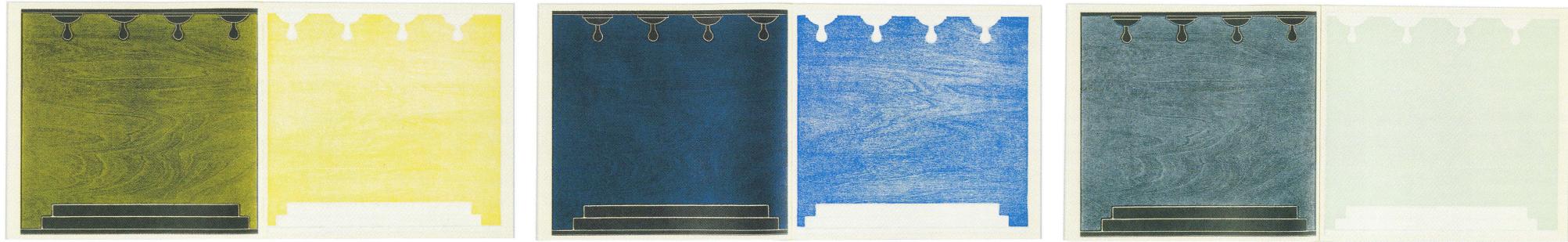
meant sharing the language—making my dialogue available to the public. Later, I asked: “What is the use value of my painting?” It now seems so relative—especially in painting: Should one be responsible in a historical/institutional sense, therefore being very clear, but perhaps didactic? Or, should we go in the opposite direction and move toward the “unknown,” away from the over-determining “known” of history? Again, this is a subjective decision.

When I think of responsibility, I think of the maxim “Know thyself.” That said, I try to expose a personal sensibility to the most complex situations—scientific, historical, critical, formal, and so on. This process should take a lifetime, and the result would be an awareness of one's self in this place in time. This is romantic, but I see a responsible person as someone who has digested and embodied their ideas, and this would especially be the case for a painter. One always thinks of Philip Guston.

JT: You've been making books for a number of years, more so recently. What led you to book-making?

DW: The original idea for the books was to better catalogue my work. In 1998 I had a show in Cologne with an accompanying catalogue. At that time, my paintings were black lines or yellow lines on white grounds. With the photography against the bright white paper stock of the book, my white looked off-white. We ended up bleeding the whole image, wall and floor included, to the border. It looked okay, but the frustration led me to think of a new way to reproduce my work: by making miniatures of my paintings in a hand-made book on off-white cold-pressed paper—not unlike the old glued “tip-ins.” I also designed a variety of discreet architectural motifs to locate the paintings in the setting. These reproductions to me became more real than typical photography in a catalogue.

My books have evolved since that first one. Now my book-making usually runs concurrent with my painting ideas—they feed each other. Like a diptych, it's more about comparing than cataloguing. A problem solved in a book might make it into a painting. On the other hand, the books are an outlet for my ideas that maybe



don't belong in my paintings, digressions that might not make an interesting image, but that have merit seen through time, in succession. Of course, being a minimalist abstract painter, I use progressions, sequencing, and variations to structure a book.

For me the big difference between painting and books is their public versus private states, respectively. The intimacy and concentration one can orchestrate in a book is unique. I also like the problem-solving aspect to making a book: paper choices, sewing, covers, printing techniques, registration, and so on. I love these problems, these puzzles. Painting's problems on the other hand are not so clear now.

JT: Do you collaborate with printers or bookbinders on the books?

DW: Yes. Joe Watanabe, a printer now with Pace Prints, has been a big influence on me. But I prefer to do everything in-house to keep the costs down, and regardless I am hands-on. I am not an artist who sends the

drawing off to a shop and says, "Make a print of this!" I am involved in every step. The *Diptych* book was carved in my studio, but printed outside. I know my limitations! I have a bookbinder who helps me with a big edition, but normally they are sewn in my studio. I need my books to lay very flat, emphasizing the two-page spread, so I need to break the rules as bookbinding goes.

JT: Recently you showed me a mockup of a book in progress called *Time Trials*, which is a sort of walk-through of an exhibition you created in Amsterdam last fall. The exhibition included a number of three-dimensional objects, which seem very different from your large abstract paintings. What is the connection between these objects and your paintings?

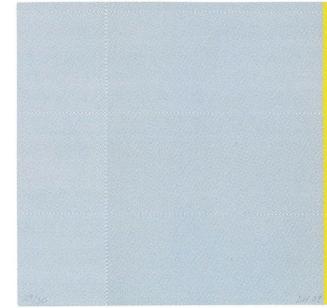
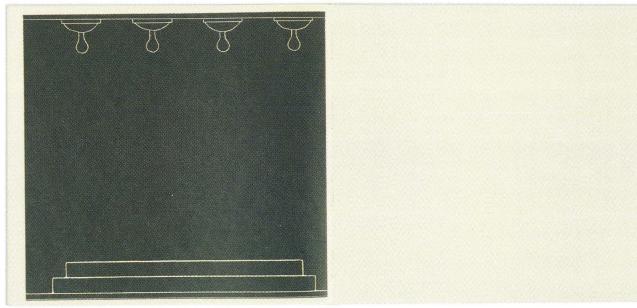
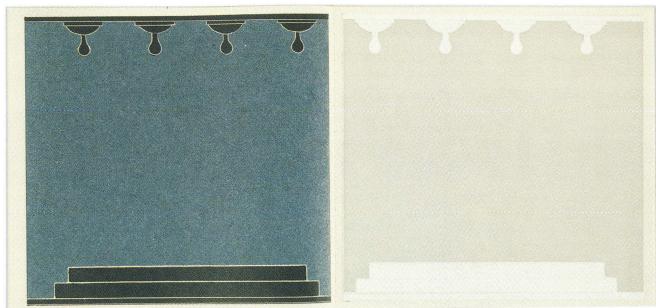
DW: I am still wondering myself. The connection has something to do with the viewer, what he or she brings to an experience. My paintings, in theory, are vehicles or forms in which a viewer's psychology is activated, whereas the structures and frames that I offer people

to look through in *Time Trials* are trying to coax a state of mind in which to view an object. There is a lot of middle gray area that I am stepping over here, but *Time Trials* is supposed to be fun and confusing.

JT: Do you think you will pursue these experiments with object-making in the future?

DW: I will definitely continue these experiments. They are like the books in that I can do research and realize some thought while keeping the painting as a more pure pursuit. In other words, I wanted a more discursive art experience, but not in my painting practice—at least not right now.

JT: I was aware of several exhibitions for which you applied simple lines of black tape to the walls to define the gallery space, and asked if you'd consider doing that here. Can you talk about how you first came to use tape that way and how you will be using it at the RISD Museum?



DW: My paintings in the early and mid-'90s were vehicles for displaying forms, ideas, and notations in racks, grids, and interfaces. They were user-friendly structures emphasizing orientation. It wasn't a big jump to take these lines from a canvas and put them on a wall. It was a recognizable extension of my painting. The first time I tried this was at a small experimental space in New York run by Petra Bungert. The installation was called *Vista*. I just tried tape instead of paint and there was a certain clarity to the tape that the paint didn't have.

What I saw had a huge impact on me, and from that point on I have been doing installation or site-specific work. The lines allow me to locate information and at the same time categorize it. They bring an intimacy to the galleries; they make a large space into a model or, dare I say, a more fictional space. At RISD, I am thinking about micro and macro—how a grid or line in my painting could be an overarching structure for the whole show.

JT: You've also been involved with several shows for which you've determined the placement of other artists'

work—including Roy Lichtenstein. What is it like being part curator, part exhibition designer?

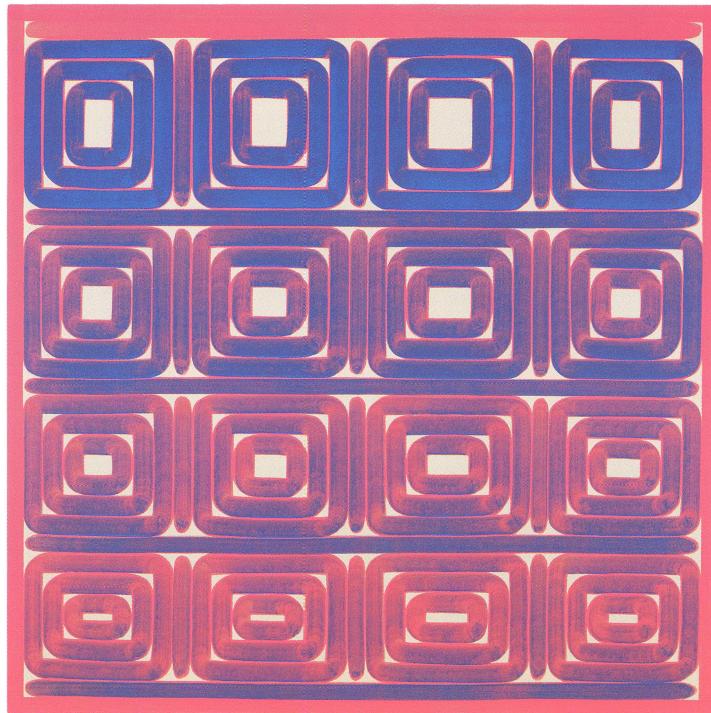
DW: One could argue that my paintings are an exercise in organizing information, images, and history, so why not other people's art? On the one hand, you want to show the best of another artist, so the curator should be behind the scenes. On the other, my instinct is to create a bigger whole out of the parts—to orchestrate a new Dan Walsh. Knowing this about myself, I've even gone so far as to curate an exhibition where I told all the artists what to make for the show. I have an instinct to make a new form—even in curating—so hanging the Lichtenstein show was more of a challenge.

JT: You've exhibited your work quite a lot in Europe—France, Germany, the Netherlands, etc. Is your work received differently in Europe than in the U.S.?

DW: Yes, even though the Internet is closing the gap on the interpretation of my work, I feel the Europeans see, or

should I say saw, my work as a critique of serious abstract painting: funny, absurd, but critical. In the U.S., on the other hand, I was seen more as having fun with painting: "a funky minimalism," a critic wrote. In general, Americans find more idiosyncrasies and a sense of humor in my work. Although I have gone out of my way to make my paintings clear, people still see what they want to see.

This interview was conducted by e-mail in March and April 2012.



Stockade 2010

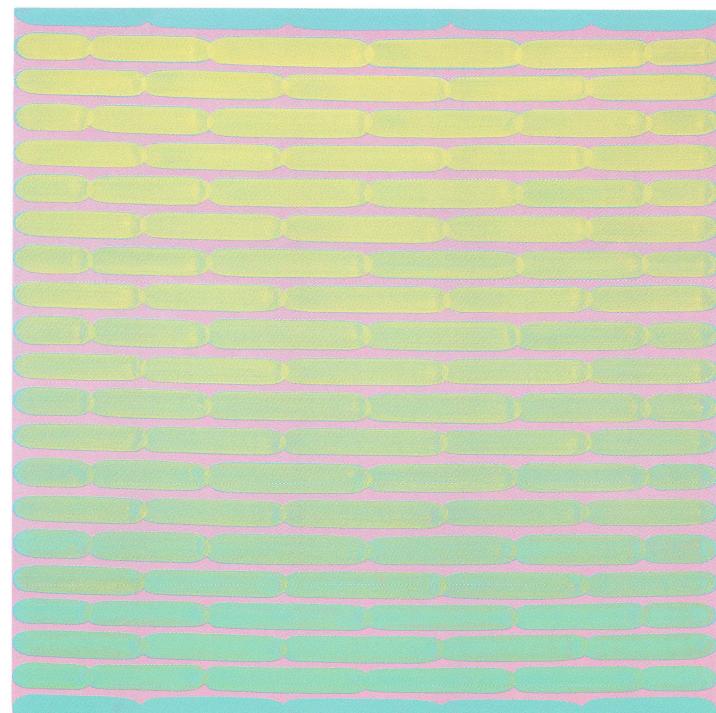
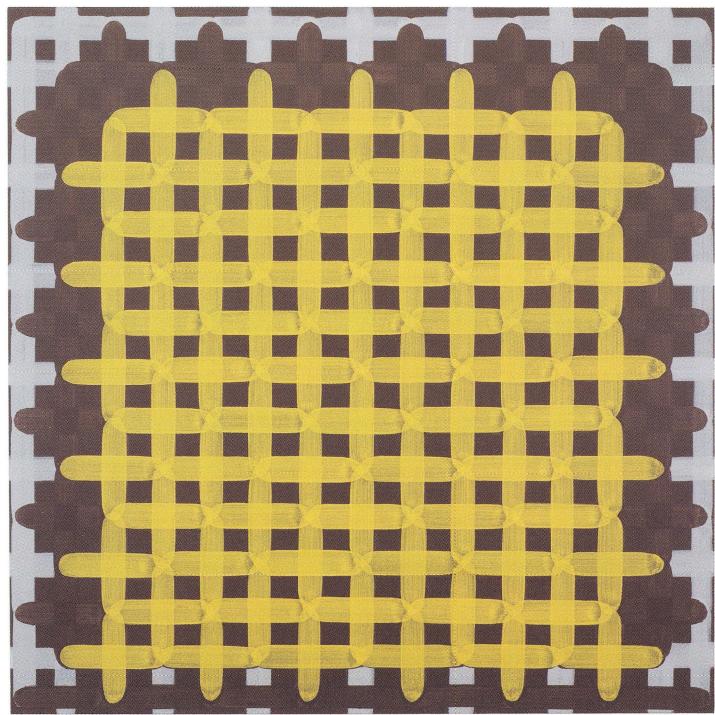
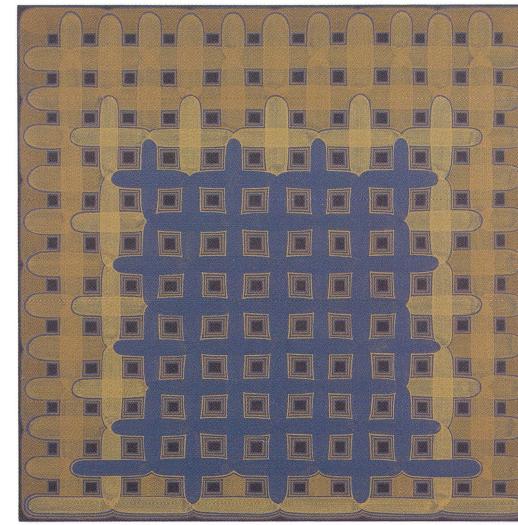


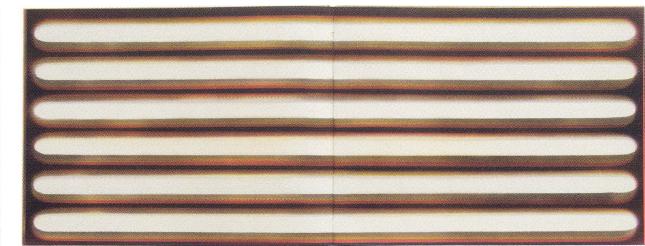
Table 2010



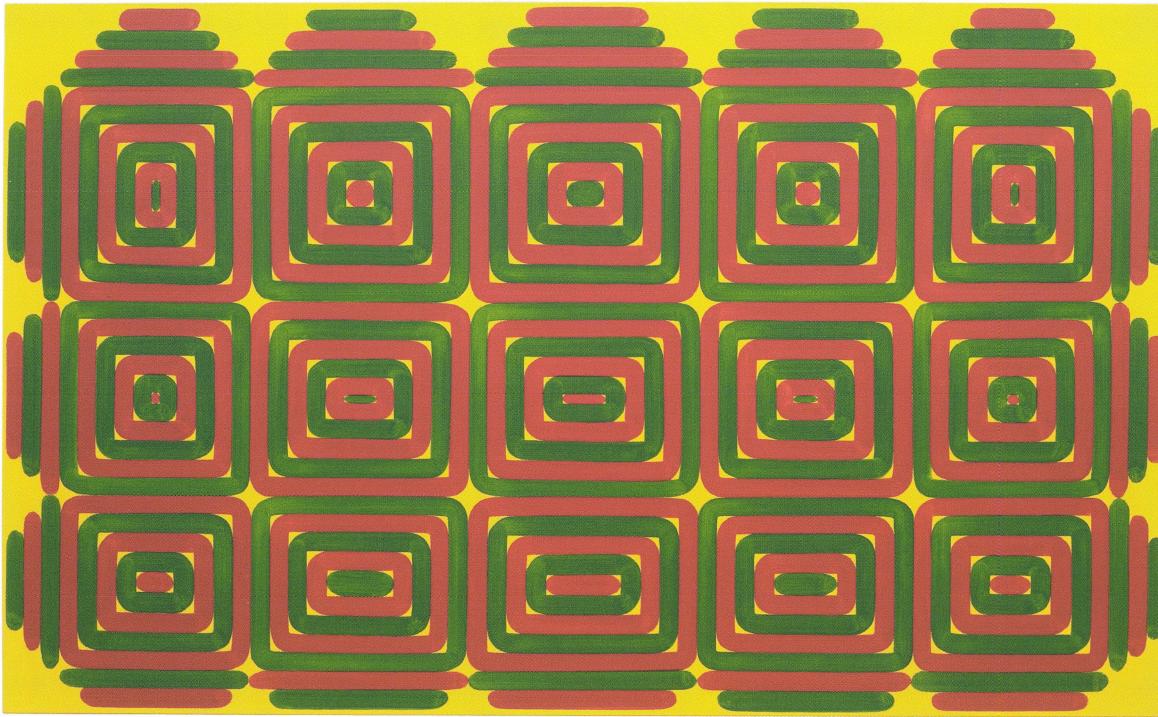
Grotto 2010



Stall 2011



1/2 Round 2008 (cover + spread)



Prompt 2010

Works in the Exhibition

All works courtesy of the artist and Paula Cooper Gallery, New York, unless otherwise indicated. In dimensions, height precedes width.

PAINTINGS

Delivery 2003

Acrylic on canvas, 55 x 85 in.

Visitor 2009

Acrylic on canvas, 55 x 55 in.

Grotto 2010

Acrylic on canvas, 55 x 55 in.

Prompt 2010

Acrylic on canvas, 55 x 90 in.

Stockade 2010

Acrylic on canvas, 55 x 55 in.

Table 2010

Acrylic on canvas, 55 x 55 in.

Stall 2011

Acrylic on canvas, 40 x 40 in.

Titze Collection

Signal 2012

Acrylic on canvas, diptych:
70 x 70 in. ea., 70 x 140 in. overall

BOOKS

1/2 Round 2008

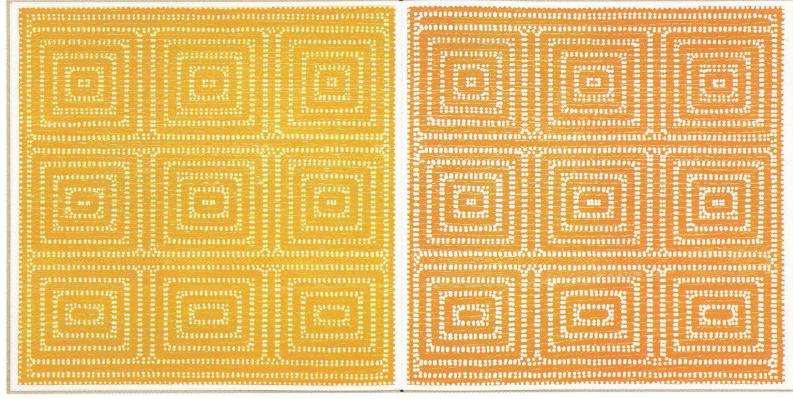
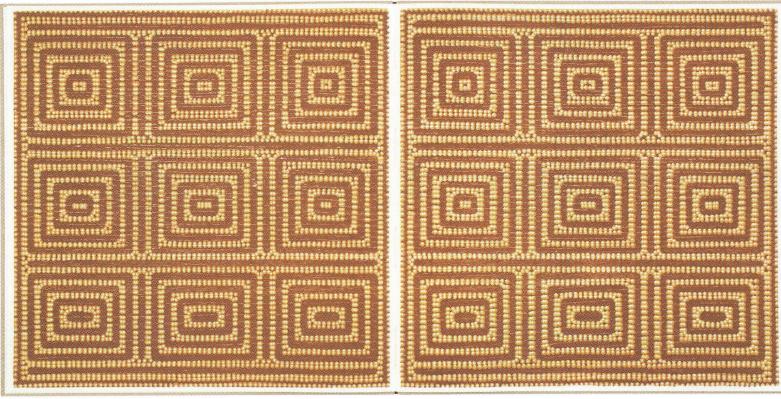
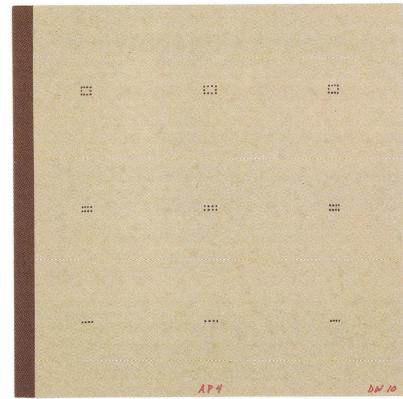
Airbrush on paper, 9 1/2 x 12 3/8 in.
(closed), edition of 12

Vista 2009

Woodcut on paper, 11 3/4 x 12 3/4 in.
(closed), edition of 30

Diptych 2010

Woodcut on paper, 15 1/4 x 15 1/4 in.
(closed), edition of 30



Diptych 2010 (cover + two spreads)

About the Artist

Dan Walsh is a painter, printmaker, and bookmaker based in New York City. Born in 1960 in Philadelphia, he received his BFA from the University of the Arts (formerly Philadelphia College of Art), Philadelphia, and his MFA from Hunter College, City University of New York.

Walsh's work has been exhibited in venues throughout the United States and Europe, including The Museum of Modern Art and The New Museum, New York; the Centre National d'Art Contemporain, Nice; La Synagogue de Delme, France; CCNOA (Art + Architecture), Brussels; and the Kunstverein Medienturm,

Graz. His prints and limited-edition books were the subject of a one-person exhibition at the Cabinet des Estampes du Musée d'Art et d'Histoire, in Geneva, Switzerland (2002). He was included in the Ljubljana Biennial, Slovenia, and the Lyon Biennial of Contemporary Art, France. Walsh's work is in many distinguished collections, including: Fonds National d'Art Contemporain, Paris; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, CT; Jumex Collection, Mexico City; Maramotti Collection, Reggio Emilia, Italy; New York Public Library, New York; Cabinet des Estampes, Geneva; Saatchi Collection, London; Victoria & Albert Museum, London; Yale University Library, New Haven, CT.



Delivery 2003

MUSEUM OF ART

RHODE ISLAND SCHOOL OF DESIGN

© 2012 Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design | risdmuseum.org

Photos © Dan Walsh, courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

Edited by Jennifer Liese, designed by Julie Fry, printed by Meridian Printing